

 September 19, 2002

Dear Local Health Officer:

At the state and local levels, there has been a recent increase in media requests and inquiries about smallpox-related issues. As preparedness for a potential smallpox case or outbreak intensifies, I anticipate that media interest will continue to grow. This may be especially true at the local level once Phase 1 pre-event vaccination of public health and health care response teams begins. The resources provided with this letter will assist you in responding to the media.

For effective communication, it is imperative that public health agencies speak with one voice. Message consistency, accuracy and timeliness are important to instill confidence that the public health system is responding in a sound manner. Three key messages for the public are:

1. **California is taking action to be prepared for a possible smallpox outbreak.** Although the probability of a smallpox outbreak is low, we must be prepared because the consequences would be great.
2. **California's first focus is vaccinating health care and hospital workers who would respond to a smallpox outbreak.** California is working with local health officials to implement a plan for the voluntary vaccination of public health and hospital workers. Once that is complete, police, fire and other emergency responders will be vaccinated.
3. **Because of its risks, the smallpox vaccine is not recommended for the general public at this time.**

During pre-event vaccination, the media will be essential for disseminating information to:

- Reassure the public that the public health system is preparing for an unlikely but potential smallpox event in a competent and sound manner.
- Familiarize the public with concepts that will help them make an informed decision about smallpox vaccination if and when smallpox vaccine is made widely available on a voluntary basis.
- Prepare the public for the likelihood of vaccine adverse reactions.



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The public also will need information about issues that will arise with pre-event vaccination, such as:

- What is being done to protect high-risk groups from inadvertent exposure to vaccinia from individuals receiving the smallpox vaccine?
- The importance of protecting household members, patients and others from inadvertent exposure to vaccinia from individuals receiving the smallpox vaccine.

This understanding must be sensitively fostered to ensure that pre-event vaccination is not misperceived as a sign of an increased risk of the reappearance of smallpox. In addition, it is important to maintain public confidence in the safety of modern routine vaccines.

Establishing trust and credibility is key to effective risk communication, especially in the face of public concern over the potential reappearance of smallpox. To help foster this needed trust and credibility, DHS is following principles of crisis and risk communication in its media correspondence. They include:

- Adopting a policy of full disclosure about what is and is not known.
- Giving a detailed accounting of what is being done to address the threat.
- Recommending specific steps that individuals can or should take to protect themselves.
- Avoiding speculation.
- Working cooperatively with other agencies to avoid issuing statements or information that conflict with each other.
- Delivering information in a non-patronizing manner.

The following enclosed hard-copy resources, which are provided in both English and Spanish, are to help you respond to media inquiries and requests and to engage in proactive outreach to the media in your jurisdiction:

- DHS document, "Smallpox: California's Public Health Activities."
- DHS document, "Smallpox Questions and Answers."
- Three CDC Fact Sheets:
 - Smallpox Overview
 - Vaccine Overview
 - Who Should NOT Receive the Smallpox Vaccine

DHS resources are available on the Web site: www.dhs.ca.gov

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CDC resources for the general public are available in PDF and Word formats at the Web site: www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/smallpox/reference/resource-kit.asp.

I hope that these resources are helpful as you provide information to the media in your local health jurisdiction. Department staff will send additional resources to you as they become available.

Sincerely,

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Deputy Director
Prevention Services